



Limit Situations and the Mystery of God: Karl Jaspers' Thought on Existence and Its Relevance for the Spirituality of the Faithful

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Abstract: This study examined the mystery of God in suffering or human limit situations according to Karl Jaspers and its implementation in the lives of the faithful. Such situations were seen as an inseparable part of human life. Karl Jaspers referred to suffering as a human limit situation. When faced with suffering, humans were unable to do anything but accept it as a part of life. The boundary situation led humans to question the existence of God, asking whether suffering came from God. For believers, suffering—whether illness, crime, or death—had to be accepted as a path to achieving holiness. The method used in this study was a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach. The purpose of the research was to explore the mystery of God in human suffering. The findings revealed that many people faltered when confronted with suffering, as they were unable to interpret it as part of their faith.

INTRODUCTION

Human life is always marked by experiences of ups and downs, joy and suffering, life and death (Stevanus, 2019). In other words, human life is extremely complicated and complex, filled with various life challenges. These challenges may involve social relationships among communities, interpersonal relationships, relationships between humans and nature, or even their faith in God (Hamu, 2023). Humans, as *homo viator* (pilgrims), inevitably face experiences of suffering, despair, illness, and death. When confronted with difficulties, problems, and ultimate situations, humans often surrender and lose hope (Panjaitan, 2021). This happens due to the limitations of humans as mortal beings.

One of the extreme experiences humans have faced in the modern era is the suffering brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic (Adon & Budi, 2021; Mujianto & Firmanto, 2021). The coronavirus, which first appeared in China, spread and claimed many lives worldwide. This virus brought many consequences to human life, such as the implementation of physical distancing rules, limiting mobility, and imposing lockdowns in many countries. These measures certainly led to a decline in both the economy and humanity (Hendro, 2020). In other words, the spread of the coronavirus pandemic has caused much suffering and created fear among humans.

The suffering caused by the pandemic brought humanity to an extreme situation. Even advanced technology in the hands of medical teams could not stop the spread of the virus (Abadi & Muthohirin, 2020). As a result, people lost hope for survival. In the midst of the pandemic, humans were forced to fight and endure. However, on the other hand, many resorted to suicide out of fear and frustration with the reality of the pandemic. Here, we see that in their

suffering, humans can either grow or deteriorate. Those who accept the suffering caused by the pandemic as an opportunity for reflection are the ones willing to grow in their lives (Novalina et al., 2021; Jehaman & Firmanto, 2021; Taroreh et al., 2021; Sumaryanto & Firmanto, 2021). Conversely, those who reject suffering view it as a source of destruction in their lives.

Karl Jaspers defines suffering as an extreme situation in human life. Humans, as *Dasein*, often experience certain extreme situations, such as death, suffering, struggle, and mistakes (Siswanto et al., 2017). These experiences continuously color human life every day. Karl Jaspers stated that without extreme situations, human life is incomplete. It is precisely in these extreme situations that humans realize a reality far greater than themselves, namely the mystery of God (Hadi & Wibawa, 2020). In short, the experience of extreme situations is an existential experience inseparable from the pilgrimage of human life.

To find novelty in this writing, the researcher reviewed previous studies on the theme of the mystery of God in human suffering experiences. Hidayat (2017) emphasized the role of faith in the midst of human suffering based on biblical experiences. Nicolas (2021) viewed Job's experience as an experience of faith. According to Ara (2019), Jesus Christ, in His love, willingly suffered, died, and rose again to free humans from the bondage of sin and death. Anjaya et al. (2022) specifically explored the consequences of following Jesus Christ, which inevitably involves suffering.

This study aims to help the faithful understand extreme situations as experiences of faith, that is, experiences of God's mystery of salvation. God, as the origin and goal of human life, is full of mercy. God never abandons humanity in both joy and sorrow. The culmination of God's mercy is in the willing sacrifice of His Only Son, who suffered, died, and rose again to free humanity from the burden of sin. The starting point of this research is the mystery of God in human extreme situations according to Karl Jaspers.

METHOD

The method used in this study is qualitative, with a phenomenological approach. Armada Riyanto explains the phenomenological approach as the subject's (human) experience (Riyanto, 2020). In the process of exploring and understanding the mystery of God in human extreme situations according to Karl Jaspers, the author employs a qualitative approach by referencing several relevant sources. Based on the above methodology and approach, the points to be addressed in this study are: First, discussing the concept of extreme situations according to Karl Jaspers; second, understanding the mystery of God in human extreme experiences; third, exploring its relevance for the life of the faithful; and lastly, drawing conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The initial development of existentialism was preceded by Kierkegaard, who sought to critique Hegel's philosophical system, which regarded the subject as part of pure thought. Kierkegaard brought existentialism to light through his concept of concrete thinking, which

eliminated objectivity in existence. In the early 19th century, Karl Jaspers continued Kierkegaard's legacy through his existential philosophy.

Karl Theodor Jaspers was born in Oldenburg, Northern Germany, on February 23, 1883. Jaspers was one of the existentialist philosophers (Hamersma, 1985). His thoughts were greatly influenced by Søren Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (Hadi & Wibawa, 2020). One of his significant works is *Philosophie* or philosophy. According to Karl Jaspers, philosophy is a never-ending act of thinking. Philosophy frees humans and teaches them to view reality as a symbol of the transcendent, which humans must explore (Siswantara, 2020). Karl Jaspers divided philosophy into three categories: philosophy oriented towards the world (*weltorientierung*), philosophy that explains human existence (*existenzerhellung*), and philosophy of the transcendent (*transzendenz*).

Jaspers explained that the world could be investigated through science, while his existential philosophy deals with human situations. The situation Jaspers referred to is the extreme situation of humans. In extreme situations, humans express their entire existence. According to Jaspers, in such situations, humans realize themselves as fragile and limited beings.

The experience of extreme situations makes humans aware of something beyond themselves (transcendence). According to Jaspers, transcendence has a hidden nature. Transcendence encompasses all that exists, including both the world and human existence (Hamersma, 1985). Extreme situations remind humans that everything in the world is a symbol of the transcendent. In other words, humans are merely symbols of the transcendent. The transcendent is the source and foundation of all that exists.

Jaspers is often categorized as an existentialist alongside Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, Camus, and Sartre. He named his philosophy "existential philosophy." Jaspers' existential philosophy investigates the foundations of human decisions and the convictions that underpin their lives. Jaspers' existential philosophy, in general, is a search for *Being**

In fact, Jaspers' search for Being had already been undertaken by Plato and Aristotle long before. However, according to Heidegger, they misunderstood what Being is. They mistakenly saw Being as presence, a view that does not connect with *Dasein* (human existence) (Hamersma, 1985).

Being was viewed as a presence that transcends Being itself, and vice versa. Hence, the revelation of Being and the appropriation of the boundless possibilities of unveiling the essence of Being were often deemed unnecessary by them (Hadi & Wibawa, 2020). Being was reduced to existence and was identified in a limited form of presence. Heidegger claimed that "the forgetfulness of Being afflicts the essence of *Being*, veiling itself." This forgetfulness is fundamentally related to the destiny of *Being*, which first emerged as the revelation of what is present. This implies that the history of *Being* begins with the forgetfulness of *Being* because *Being*, along with its essence and its distinction from beings, remains within itself. Broadly speaking, Jaspers' existential philosophy stems from the assumption that there is no universal ontology in this world.

For Jaspers, such an ontology is impossible because our views of what is essential vary (Hamersma, 1985). Nevertheless, Jaspers in Hasan does not deny that an absolute essence exists, but he asserts that we will not find it in the world we face as an object. As long as we inhabit the world with the perception of a subject-object separation, the world we observe is merely phenomenal — a world as it appears to us. The world that appears to us, the world we inhabit, presents itself through a configuration that occurs due to the synthesis between our intuition and understanding.

The presence of extreme situations in human life is mainly due to what Jaspers considered as situationality, which refers to the connection between humans and certain situational forms (Hamersma, 1985). According to Jaspers in Hasan, humans can avoid one situation, but this means they will arrive at another. The fact that someone exists as a human means they are always in a particular situation that cannot be avoided by anyone. Humans are in a specific situation because they exist. However, humans still do not fully understand their situation completely. They only know and act based on certain parts of the situation they are currently experiencing. A situation is better understood when a person retrospects the events and actions they have undertaken (Hamersma, 1985).

The situation is not a reality determined by the universe, but a reality solely determined by a person's psychological and physical relations. Referring to its concrete value, a situation means something pleasant or unpleasant. Situations can change and also end, but they are then replaced by other situations. Situations are not always given but are more often caused by humans themselves. It is humans who create situations. They can shape and change new situations for specific purposes.

Humans can imagine a situation as the relative location of everything in the universe. As limited subjects, humans acquire their essence by interacting with other subjects, each having their own interests. Therefore, humans can only live their existence when they are with other people.

In more concrete terms, Jaspers asserts that existence only happens through life in society (Siswanto et al., 2017). This means that humans are always involved in social events and situations. The ways of relating to these social situations vary. One may simply surrender to a social situation without feeling capable or needing to maintain themselves as an authentic being, thus allowing themselves to drift into communal life without their own identity.

This way of relating to social situations prevents someone from presenting their authenticity. For Jaspers, what is important is how communication with these social situations can occur without one losing personal authenticity (Hamersma, 1985). In this regard, Jaspers emphasizes the importance of intersubjective relationships. Communication must provide an opportunity for personal authenticity to be expressed. In such communication, the parties involved must shed any masks that conceal their personal authenticity. This communication, which allows each party to present their own authenticity, is existential communication. In existential communication, the parties involved must be willing to accept the possibility of

facing conflict, as each will present their own authenticity. However, conflict in existential communication, according to Jaspers, is enveloped in love.

In social life, humans find opportunities to conduct existential communication, and through this, they express their authenticity. This is only possible when they relate to others as friends in an intersubjective relationship. However, existential communication is not possible with society as a whole, because society as a whole is an objectivity. Society is not subjectivity, and therefore it is not possible to establish an intersubjective relationship with society, making existential communication impossible with society.

Karl Jaspers defines a limit situation as one beyond human reason and control. Limit situations are experienced by humans in specific conditions, namely death, suffering, struggle, and error (Siswanto et al., 2017). In such limit situations, humans manifest their entire existence. Limit situations are realities that are never separate from human life.

These limit situations show that humans are never perfect within themselves. For humans, these limit situations lead them to the conclusion that there is something beyond themselves. This awareness brings humans to an endless search. Limit situations either help humans grow or cause them to surrender (Hamersma, 1985). In this case, humans have the freedom to choose.

Karl Jaspers names suffering as one of the limit situations in human life. According to Jaspers, all forms of suffering gradually destroy human *Dasein*. All diseases, experiences of grief, despair, slavery, and hunger can destroy human existence. When faced with suffering, humans have the freedom to choose. Humans can either reject suffering or accept it as an integral part of life. Even though humans have the freedom to choose, all people still experience suffering (Hamersma, 1985).

Suffering, according to Jaspers, has a dual meaning. It can be positive or negative. Suffering can become something positive if humans are willing to accept it as an integral part of their existence. In suffering, humans reflect on themselves—what is the meaning of life? What is their purpose? By not escaping suffering, humans grow and develop in their existence.

However, suffering also has a negative meaning because it leads to human destruction. Therefore, humans try to escape it and seek comfort in happiness. For Jaspers, rejecting suffering means missing the opportunity to grow as an existence. Humans who flee from suffering tend to become shallow in their lives.

Karl Jaspers argues that the experience of suffering makes humans aware of their limitations. Human existence is limited and imperfect. In suffering, humans try to find answers (Hadi & Wibawa, 2020). Humans realize that beyond their existence, there is another force governing everything in this world. Humans view suffering as something irrational. This experience of the limit encourages humans to seek something perfect that lies beyond themselves. Karl Jaspers calls this transcendent reality. The transcendent encompasses everything in this world. Another characteristic of the transcendent is its non-concrete nature. The essence of the transcendent is hidden from human reason and cannot be comprehended.

So, how can we come to know the transcendent? According to Jaspers, our knowledge of the transcendent comes through everything that exists in this world. Jaspers refers to everything in this world as ciphers of transcendence. Everything that exists and is visible is an appearance of the transcendent. In other words, suffering as a limit situation is not the end of human life. The ultimate end and goal of human life, according to Jaspers, is the transcendent.

In addition to suffering, another form of a limit situation in Jaspers' philosophy of existence is struggle. Humans are beings who struggle, and struggle is a limit situation that compels humans to keep fighting (Hamersma, 1985). Struggle, as a form of a limit situation, is always united with human existence. Even if one tries to avoid all forms of struggle, they are still connected to other forms of struggle. For Jaspers, struggle becomes more serious when its form is not visible as individual struggle but is hidden behind the interests of certain social groups, such as a country whose actions are not directly known by the individual but are directly felt by them.

Humans will always struggle passively and unconsciously to merely achieve peace. However, if they want their life to grow better and be free from suffering, they must struggle actively, but the material conditions that are the primary goal of this struggle are always limited. This situation forces them to compete with others for that material by struggling. The struggle for material wealth typically takes place in the economic sphere. According to Jaspers, this material struggle can be peaceful or violent. When people compete openly for material wealth, brutal competition full of deceit often arises. If material struggle, especially if conducted violently, is maintained by any party, it can lead to unnatural social relations between individuals. The victorious party will dominate the defeated, and the defeated will continue to be oppressed for the rest of their lives.

In addition to material struggle, there is another kind of struggle humans constantly engage in: the struggle of *Existenz*. This struggle does not harm others and only takes place within one's inner self (Hamersma, 1985). The essence of this struggle is far removed from things related to violence, such as physical violence, which would cause harm to others' existence. The struggle of *Existenz* is a manifestation of the intrinsic *Being* of humans. Jaspers refers to this kind of struggle as *Liebender Kampf* (the struggle of love). Jaspers defines the struggle of love as a life process that expresses love in *Existenz*. Love dares to place both parties into total doubt to reach the true depth of their soul. The struggle into the phenomenality of *Existenz* is a condition for its realization. Although the nature of material struggle and the struggle of love differ, these two forms of struggle can transform into their opposites. The struggle of love can deteriorate into coercion, while the material struggle can suddenly be infused with *Existenz*.

Just like suffering, mistakes are also a form of limit situation. Humans always engage in social interaction with others or certain groups through their active actions. Through these active actions, people often make mistakes toward others, which they become aware of as an aspect of their existence. They recognize that they have made various mistakes that could potentially harm others' existence. Therefore, everyone must be able to accept that mistakes

are an inseparable part of themselves, even though this limit situation is often avoided in many ways. The presence of mistakes in human *Dasein* has an extraordinary impact on their life in the world (Hamersma, 1985). Mistakes can render one's life meaningless due to the material and moral losses one has to bear.

Every mistake has the potential to create tension in reality, but this tension plays a role in leading us to the manifestation of *Existenz* in the pursuit of truth through transcendence (Hamersma, 1985). For *Existenz* to manifest, it must be driven by the tension between right and wrong. However, mistakes within the limit situation cannot be objectively understood as they are experienced as the presence of *Existenz*. What can be understood is only the personal historical experience. Our *Existenz* harms others, and likewise, the existence of others also harms us. Considering the limitation of our movement, every position we hold negates the existence and interests of others. In existence, we enjoy various conveniences and successes in all fields, leading us to a prosperous life. However, the ease we gain often causes others to suffer.

Suffering occurs because we have taken the path that rightfully belongs to others, making it easier for us to reach the pinnacle of success. Thus, our existence in the social environment is detrimental to others. If we realize this, we will feel that we have opposed *Existenz*. When the process of contemplating mistakes reaches its peak, one may decide not to take any action to avoid making mistakes. They do not harm others by not acting, but this decision is still a form of action—a silent action with fatal consequences for oneself. The result of this action is self-destruction (Hamersma, 1985).

Remaining silent is akin to committing suicide. Humans cannot endure staying silent indefinitely because it leads to suffering. Taking no action is a form of rejecting the challenges in the reality of the world that requires solutions. In existence, our actions are always influenced by the social environment, and rarely do we use reason to face it. To fulfill life's needs, we often compete to have more than others. Generally, what we must carefully consider in this limit situation of mistakes is the courage to face whatever happens due to our actions, even if it was never our intention. We are responsible for our actions. Responsibility is the expression of bearing the burden of our mistakes because of the actions we take. Responsibility in silence that manifests the presence of *Existenz* makes us willing to accept the inevitable mistakes caused by our actions. This process takes place in the tension between acceptance and rejection, manifesting into real *Existenz*.

Humans are the bearers of all mistakes or sins as inevitable possibilities. However, the most important limit situation is death. No matter how existence is lived as freedom and openness, and how uncertainty allows us to experience existence as never fully closed and stable, we cannot avoid death as the most certain reality (Hamersma, 1985). Death is closely attached to existence as an unavoidable limit situation. No one knows what death truly is. What is certain is that death will inevitably end one's existence at an unpredictable moment. *Mors certa; hora incerta*. This phrase means that death is certain and undeniable.

When death arrives and what it actually is—these are the things we certainly do not know. As long as death remains an objective fact in existence, death is not a limit situation. As long as humans still try to avoid death, they have not yet entered the limit situation (Hamersma, 1985). Humans understand death, but they do not know when it will occur. As a subject, humans pursue life goals and strive to ensure that what they love continues indefinitely. They become disappointed when things they cherish are damaged or lost, and they also become disappointed when loved ones die. Thus, whether they like it or not, humans in this world must face endings, although they often forget that everything will eventually come to an end. Conversely, as *Existenz*, the historical nature of humans gives them the certainty that their existence is phenomenal within time. This means that humans, as phenomena, know both beginnings and endings (Hadi & Wibawa, 2020). The sorrow experienced in the face of death is merely an expression of their *Existenz* as phenomena.

Karl Jaspers viewed suffering as a limit situation in human life. Regarding suffering, humans have the freedom to either accept or reject it. Although humans have the freedom to choose, everyone experiences suffering. Suffering, on the one hand, brings negative consequences, but on the other hand, it fosters growth and development in human life (Siswanto, et al., 2017). Suffering as a limit situation makes humans aware of their own fragility and of the existence of transcendence (Widayanti, 2021). The current outbreak of the coronavirus is an example of the suffering humans are facing. To this day, there is no vaccine to prevent and combat this virus. In this situation, humans feel overwhelmed and experience their limitations. This awareness of limitation leads humans to acknowledge the transcendent. Karl Jaspers referred to the transcendent as the foundation of all that exists in the world. Human surrender to transcendent power signifies that humans are merely creations and reflections of the transcendent (Zaluchu, 2017).

A critical reflection on suffering helps us realize that human pilgrimage is never free from suffering. The experience of suffering helps humans reflect on themselves. Even though in the end, they do not find definite answers to their suffering, suffering as a limit situation often remains a great mystery to humans. This is what leads humans to surrender to it (Bora, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Suffering is an everyday human experience. Karl Jaspers referred to suffering as a limit situation in human life. Suffering can manifest as illness, disease, or any situation that causes humans to suffer. Suffering can slowly destroy a person. When confronted with suffering, humans have the freedom to either accept or reject it. Despite having the freedom to choose, humans will inevitably experience suffering in their lives.

Humans cannot deny the reality of suffering. Suffering becomes an integral part of human pilgrimage. Suffering as a limit situation makes humans aware of their own fragility and weakness. One example is the current Covid-19 pandemic, which has spread across the globe. Many people have died or been infected by this virus. To this day, no experts have been

able to find a vaccine. Humans surrender and seek protection from a higher power outside themselves. Jaspers referred to this higher power as the transcendent.

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